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Images of women in music videos : a critical analysis

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IMAGES OF WOMEN IN MUSIC VIDEOS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

IMAGES OF WOMEN IN MUSIC VIDEOS:
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This thesis addresses the topic of images of women in music videos as seen on MTV from February-April, 1994. It categorizes the different types of images of women according to a sexism scale, which is applied to a 24-hour sample of MTV programming. In addition, a critical analysis of high, medium, and low sexism-ranking videos examines individual videos in the sample, in terms of context, narrative structure, and subtext.

This study reveals that the frequency of images of women in music videos on MTV appears to have dropped from previous studies done on MTV during the 1980s. This may be due in part to a change in male-dominated music genres such as rap and grunge. Many of the images of women which do remain prevalent in music video are highly sexist, but some are complex and contain signs and symbols of female empowerment.

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Introduction

Since its debut in 1981, MTV's video content could be described as racist, sexist, offensive, innovative, art, and the ultimate form of the television commercial. The MTV format, running 24 hours a day and 365 days a year, offers a dizzying assortment of entertainment news, "Rockumentaries," music specials, old situation-comedy reruns, and the music videos themselves. The content of the music videos has come under fire by a variety of critics: television mogul Ted Turner, Tipper Gore, and the National Coalition Against Television Violence (Denisoff, 1988).

Most of the criticism launched against the music video genre has to do with its alleged sexual and violent content, mostly directed against women. Various studies, discussed in the accompanying literature review, examine the sexist and violent content on music videos and MTV. Depending upon the type of research conducted, the results regarding MTV, sex and violence have differed. Content analysis studies by Sherman and Dominick (1986), Caplan (1985), and Vincent, Davis and Boruszkowski (1987), measuring sexist images and images of violence against women, often garnered significant results. Audience-centered studies by Sun and Lull (1986), Greeson and Williams (1986), and Hansen and Hansen (1990), discovered that viewers, particularly teens, use MTV for a variety of reasons. Critical studies, especially those with feminist leanings by Lewis (1990) and Freccero (1992), have explored MTV as a medium which can both engage in sexist images, and, conversely, provide positive, empowering role models for teenage girls.

The shortcomings of these studies are in the area of measurement and complete explanation. The content analysis studies, for example, excluded

performance videos (Sherman & Dominick, 1986), ignored the relationship between the images and the song lyrics (Vincent et al. 1987), and often failed to take the context of a concept music video into account (Gow, 1992). The critical studies were fascinating, in-depth examinations of specific videos, but were too narrow to give any broad-based view of MTV sexist content. Finally, audience-centered studies found short-term effects, such as in the area of permissive attitudes toward premarital sex after MTV viewing, but could not find long-term effects. The flaw present in all this research is that, if the measurement of MTV's content is tenuous, it is almost impossible to find out, specifically, what was influencing the MTV audience to begin with.

There is evidence, however, that children and adolescents use television programming for socialization purposes. Baran (1976), for example, tried to link sexual attitudes and televised sex outside of the MTV arena with some success. He found that a relationship existed between the teenage perceptions of television portrayals of sex and first-time enjoyment of sexual intercourse. Baran (1976) wrote:

> Adolescent frustration and dissatisfaction with sexual performance and pleasure are apparently facts of life, and media portrayals of sexual behavior that raise expectations may be a contributing factor to that frustration and dissatisfaction ...Although sex on television is not as explicit as that in films and magazines, its impact may be greater because it is constantly in the home (without any apparent social restriction), rather easily available, and is indeed presented as enjoyable and attractive. (p.63)

Baran was referring to network television in this quote, but the main points could be applied to MTV. Not only is MTV in the home (depending upon the availability of cable), it is also, unlike network programming, aired

continuously. MTV's original slogan, "I Want My MTV," presents the channel as enjoyable, attractive, and even a necessity.

Since 1976, sex on television has definitely increased. Sapolsky and Tabarlet (1991) compared one week of network programming from 1979 to one week in 1989. They found that in 1989, a sexual incident occurred every four minutes, which was a one minute increase from 1979. This increase in sexual incidents obviously didn't include programming from networks like FOX and MTV--they didn't exist in 1979.

Sexual images present on MTV have raised controversy, but it is not the mere sexuality which critics find so offensive. Sexual objectification, not sex, is the real culprit in MTV's programming. Russell (1993) defines sexual objectification as:

> The portrayal of human beings--usually women--as depersonalized sexual things such as "tits, cunt, and ass," not as multi-faceted human beings deserving equal rights with men...the sexual objectification of females is not confined to pornography. It is also a staple of mainstream movies, ads, record covers, songs, magazines, television, art cartoons, literature, pin-ups, and so on, as well as being a way of conceptualizing how many men learn to see women and sometimes children. (p. 6)

One content analysis study by Vincent, Davis & Boruszkowski (1987) analyzed 30 hours of MTV videos according to a four-point sexism scale, level one being the female image of a Playboy bunny and level four being a fully equal female character. What the study found was a predominance of stereotypic, traditional gender roles and sexual objectification. When the study was replicated by Vincent (1989) two years later, the predominance of Playboy bunny images had been reduced by 22%, because of the presence of

more female rock musicians. However, there were "small increases in the use of lingerie and lingerie adaptations, nudity, and violence" (p. 160).

Four years have passed since Vincent (1989) found these changes. The music scene has changed considerably since the 1980s, and MTV clearly documents these changes. Rap music is now frequently shown, while in the 1980s blacks, and especially the black rap culture, were still being largely excluded from the MTV airwaves (Denisoff, 1988). Music trends like hip-hop, grunge, and more alternative music have arrived on MTV, and it is likely that these changes in music style have also changed the sexual and sexist images of women in rock videos.

It has already been asserted that MTV content has never been measured particularly well. Furthermore, MTV has not been closely scrutinized since the 1980s, which was, culturally, a very different decade from the 1990s. While the 1980s cultural mindset seemed intent upon profit and technopop, the 1990s is a more conflicted decade of both the criminally-minded capitalism of rap and the sadly personal wails of grunge rock.

This study hypothesizes that sexist images of women on MTV are still rampant. The study examines the frequency of sexist images of women, and of an absence of female images from the video genre altogether. Exclusion from the MTV medium is not necessarily an improvement over sexist representation.

The focus of this study is the critical section, which will explore videos in depth. The purpose of this critical section is to give a face and a context to the videos themselves. It is a simple matter to count sexist images, but no coding scheme could convey the total impact of individual videos. In order

to understand the forces that create these music videos, individual music video directors are interviewed and their insights into the creative process of video production chronicled.

This section does not only discuss and describe individual music videos, it includes responses from music video fans regarding one specific video, garnered from the Internet system, to gain some perspective on the audience reaction to sexism in music videos.

This study offers a clear look at what exactly teenagers are watching on MTV in terms of gender roles and sexual objectification. In the past, television has lagged behind society in providing accurate images of women, particularly in the workplace (Signorielli, 1989). While uses and gratifications studies regarding teenage use of MTV and attitude changes are useful, they only present use patterns and attitudes, rather than exploring the material the teenagers are actually watching. If today's teenagers use MTV for socialization purposes, such as for sex education as teens used network television in Baran's study (1976), it would be extremely useful to discover specifically what they are watching. Such findings about MTV could be applied to audience-centered studies regarding the role media images play in influencing teenagers' attitudes and behaviors.

Literature Review

Most Americans can order basic cable for his or her television set and receive MTV in the bargain. MTV, only in existence since 1981, is a relatively young medium, but its influence on both pop culture and the music industry itself is undeniable. As Denisoff (1988) explained, "It (MTV) transformed many segments of the entertainment and news print media with its style, *film noir*, mood, and abbreviated span of attention" (p. 241).

MTV has also been rife with controversy surrounding its rock videos. Alternately labeled as art by those directors and artists who produce the videos and as a bad influence by such personalities as media mogul Ted Turner, who tried to start his own Cable Music Channel in 1984 (it failed in 1985), MTV has been under fire for showing videos containing sex and violence.

In 1984, the National Coalition on Television Violence (NCTV) issued a press release, quoted in Denisoff (1988), in which chairperson Dr. Thomas Radecki wrote:

> Sadistic and sexually sadistic violence of a very intense nature is common on MTV, worse than any other TV channel except possible HBO and other pay-cable movie channels...MTV and Warner push very violent sadistic and hate programming into the American home. This telecasting is very similar to the material researched at the University of Wisconsin which caused major increases in desensitization towards violence in normal male viewers and major increases in their willingness to rape women. This programming clearly incites imminent violence. (p. 284)

Although there were thought to be methodological problems with the NCTV ratings system used in its content analysis of rock videos, the theme of MTV as cable's "baddest boy" stuck. Hammered over and over again by the

Christian Right's Praise the Lord (PTL) Network, MTV in the 1980s was immersed in controversy over content.

More recent criticism comes from *MS.* Magazine. In an article, "Hooked on Hate," writer Kathi Maio (1990) wrote:

> Ironically, MTV has a 'Stereotypes Suck' promo campaign (meant to foster racial harmony). Yet that very popular cable network promotes damaging stereotypes of women in almost every video it airs. In most, women are portrayed as passive, scantily clad sex objects. But then you notice videos in which those same garter-belted cuties are shown behind bars or in chains. (p. 113)

These comments and criticisms surrounding MTV's content are normative ones, pointing out faults and flaws and discussing specifics rather than looking at MTV's content as a whole. The purpose of this paper is to provide a review of the relevant literature on the subject of images of violence and sexism on MTV. Perhaps from this review some guidelines can be drawn for further research on MTV and the images it contains.

A Perspective on MTV

Some context on MTV itself is helpful. Although MTV is merely the showcase for the rock videos which contain the images to be studied, it is, nevertheless, the first 24-hour-a-day context for the videos. This context, some researchers and scholars argue, affects the way viewers perceive the individual videos (Gow, 1991; Kaplan, 1987).

MTV's original conception was as a television version of an FM radio station, playing rock video clips 24 hours a day, seven days a week. In the early 1980s, FM radio was stagnating, and MTV seemed like it might be the

savior for the recording industry. "How many times can you hear 'Layla', or 'Stairway to Heaven'?" asked Les Garland at Atlantic Records in 1981. "In my travels that's what I found on every station. I thought 'Gee, there ought to be something that radio is going to wake up and do.' MTV seemed like just what was needed" (Denisoff, 1988, p. 39).

MTV's ascendency may have been inevitable, simply because it fit an empty hole in the promotional world.

> As television forms, the music video and music TV services have subsumed the function of the variety show in disseminating popular music to vast audiences...there is currently no network program routinely devoted to concert-sytle performance by today's rock and pop performers, as *The Midnight Special* was in the 1970s. In their place we have the different forms of music television--entire broadcasting services, such as MTV and Country Music Television in the US and Much Music and Musique Plus in Canada. (Allan, 1990, p. 4)

MTV's first official slogan was, "MTV. You'll never look at music the same way again," and it proved to be correct. Although music video clips had been in existence for promotional purposes since the 1960s, there had never been a media outlet specifically for them. Before MTV, videos were shown on shows such as "Pop Clips," or used as filler on pay TV channels. MTV turned selected rock videos into a miracle of narrowcasting: a 24-hour a day channel designed to appeal to the hard-to-reach "under-34" demographic. This under-34 demographic had money to spend, but didn't read newspapers or watch TV. These peculiarities made the under-34's difficult to reach from an advertising standpoint. MTV was the new advertising for this generation.

This narrowcasting, while effectively excluding many black and R&B artists who apparently didn't appeal to the under-34 demographic, gave new exposure to the second "British Invasion" happening in the early to mid

1980s. MTV often ran videos from groups like Duran Duran, who couldn't get airplay on the popular Top 40 stations before its MTV exposure. By 1983, many recording artists were demanding their own videos. "Videos got me quicker exposure than any other form of promotion," said artist Pat Benatar, "and helped spread the word on my nine-month tour. Kids knew who I was and what I looked like in addition to how I sang" (Denisoff, 1988, p. 121).

In addition to showing videos, MTV sponsored contests like "The MTV House Party," and produced its own New Year's Eve specials, hosted by MTV's mutually admired and maligned video jockeys. In 1985, MTV Network launched yet another video channel, Video Hits 1 (VH-1). VH-1 was aimed at an older demographic, without the hardcore, rock and roll edge of MTV. VH-1 played clips from artists like Paul McCartney, Linda Ronstadt, and Carly Simon, artists who occasionally crossed over into MTV, but were part of a mellower, older music genre.

As a medium vulnerable to advertising pressures, MTV has always edited overly violent or sexual material from the rock videos it plays. Artists who refuse the editing requested by the channel are not played. Many objectionable videos cited by such watchdogs as Rev. Don Wildmon's National Federation for Decency were never shown on MTV (Denisoff, 1988).

Although other music video channels have tried to compete with MTV, it still remains number one. In the mid-1980s, MTV suffered poor Nielson ratings, although the MTV executives protested that the channel's young audience was not properly represented in the sample (Denisoff, 1988). MTV has survived into the 1990s by revamping its format.

In the mid-to late 1980s, MTV began showing reruns of television shows like "The Monkees" and "The Young Ones." MTV Music News was expanded, and MTV began to air acoustically oriented specials, like MTV's "Unplugged." MTV runs its own rather radical animated show called "Liquid Television." "Beavis and Butthead" and the 1994 creation "The Brothers Grunt" are in-house animated shows which incorportate snippets of music videos into animated narratives. The "Rock the Vote" campaign, which started in 1988, reached full form in 1992, and had so much influence that the Clinton/Gore ticket even appeared on the channel. Contrary to the racial situation in the 1980s, MTV now shows many black and rap artists.

The 1990s have ushered in a new era in MTV, along with some kinder, gentler messages virtually anathema to rock and roll's original irresponsible edge. As noted in the *Wall Street Journal*: "MTV, which once affected an antiestablishment style, now urges its young throngs of viewers to read more books, abstain from drugs and register to vote. The proud-to-be-mindless music channel, formerly an obstinate oasis from preachy parents, now warns against the evils of excessive drinking and encourages kids to take better care of the environment" (*The Wall Street Journal*, 1993).

Because of this shift in MTV's image, it would be interesting to see if MTV's video imagery is changing along with it, showing less sexism and violence. Tom Wolzien of marketing research company Bernstein Research said that "by persisting in the current crop of dark, leathery, metal videos, the recording studios and MTV may begin to drive away female viewers. That would have an adverse effect on MTV and therefore adversely affect revenue" (*The Wall Street Journal*, 1993). If Wolzien's prediction holds any

truth, then future research on MTV should indicate a lowered frequency of violently sexual videos as the channel tries to keep its female viewers.

Uses and Gratifications and Audience Centered Research

The purpose of uses and gratifications research is to discover what the audience does with the media, and what the audience gets out of the media usage. Katz, Blumler and Gurevich (1973-74) give a step-by-step guide to how this brand of research is approached. Uses and gratifications research is concerned with:

> (1) the social and psychological origins of (2) needs, which generate (3) expectations of (4) the mass media or other sources, which lead to (5) differential patterns of media exposure (or engagement in other activities), resulting in (6) need gratifications and (7) other consequences, perhaps mostly unintended ones. (p. 510)

This area of research is not concerned with the harmful effects which may be produced by the media, mainly because it does not view the audience as a passive entity. Rather, the audience is viewed as an active presence, which is able to make choices about its media consumption and uses the media for its own needs.

Audiences use the media for a variety of needs. McQuail, Blumler and Brown (1972) suggest that the audience used media for diversion, personal relationships, personal identity or individual psychology, and surveillance of the environment. In other words, media helps audiences to function in an increasingly complex world.

Many of the questions involved in uses and gratifications research and MTV are connected to this main point: Why do audiences watch MTV, and what do they get out of it?

Much of this research on MTV focuses on adolescents, simply because MTV is directed specifically at the youth market. Robert Pittman, a top executive at MTV in 1985, remarked that "at MTV, we don't shoot for the fourteen year olds--we own them" (Denisoff, 1988, p. 323). Thus, these owned 14 year olds and other adolescents are surveyed or shown various videos and asked questions afterwards.

Along these lines, Sun and Lull (1986) conducted a survey of 9th- 12th graders at an ethnically diverse San Jose high school. Out of the original sample, 80% said they were viewers of MTV, averaging more than two hours of viewing each day. The main reason for the viewing, Sun and Lull found, had to do "directly with some aspect of music" (p. 118). These students were attracted by the channel's musical content and were very specific about what they wanted to see on MTV, which was "particular groups, singers, and concerts" (p. 118). The other primary attraction to MTV was its visual impact:

> Respondents see the images as "visual aids" or "pictoral translations" of the meaning of the various songs they represent. Some students said that videos give "more meaning" to a song than they themselves would conjure up or that the videos promote "a whole new meaning" or a "different perspective" on the meaning. (p. 121)

Sun and Lull concluded that MTV may not be merely television, but a melding of television and radio. They concluded that the MTV audience they surveyed was actively involved in the viewing process, not merely sitting on a couch and zoning out to MTV all day.

Gow (1991) came to the same conclusion, saying that, "The experience of attending to a channel such as MTV may have more in common with listening to radio then with viewing other types of television programming. If so, then music video, like music itself, may have the potential to call up a wide array of meanings in viewers" (p. 39).

However, some audience-centered studies have found more direct links between MTV and its teenage audience. Greeson and Williams (1986) selected 34 tenth graders and 30 seventh graders, and showed them randomly recorded one-hour long videotapes of MTV. After the viewing, Greeson and Williams found that "the present study suggests the potentially powerful influence of popular music and MTV on young people, especially with regard to attitudes towards violence and premarital sex" (p. 187). Greeson and Williams, however, also stressed that this influence of attitude may be short lived.

As mentioned previously, MTV has been accused of showing an abundance of sexual and violent images. Hansen and Hansen (1990) took a different approach to the issues of sex and violence, asking: "Why is there sex and violence on MTV in the first place?"

At first, the answer seems simple: because sex and violence sells. Yet, Hansen and Hansen found that this "conventional wisdom" was only partially accurate. After showing violent and sexually explicit videos to 600 college students, Hansen and Hansen concluded that, while sex is appealing in rock music videos and the sexual videos were judged "most appealing and left viewers in the most positive mood," violent content had an opposite effect. "Highly violent videos were rated as extremely unappealing and

produced very negative emotional experiences. In addition, the formula for producing the least enjoyable rock video was clear: Make it highly violent, add sex and, then, arousing music" (p.232). Hansen and Hansen's final point, then, was "why is there violence in rock videos at all?" (p. 232)

Content Analysis Studies

Although the question of why violence is present in rock videos has yet to be answered, there is plenty of it on MTV. Keeping track of the violent and sexist images on MTV is best dealt with through content analysis. By viewing the material and coding the different images that appear, a researcher can gather enough information to determine the frequency of certain images.

Just because content exists, however, does not mean that content has any sort of effect on the audience. Common sense is not a true indicator of anything in the social sciences. McQuail (1990) noted:

> It should now be axiomatic that content (whether as sent or as received) does not equal effect because of : the many alternative ways in which messages can be interpreted and applied by their receivers; the fact that societal conditions and contexts encourage some, and discourage other, effects; the inefficiency of the whole media "delivery" system. (p. 179)

Content may not automatically equal effect, but cultivation theory suggests that increased exposure to the content may affect, or cultivate, attitudes. Signorielli (1987), in a study focused on the effect of images of men and women in primetime network television dramas, used a content analysis of gender roles plus a secondary analysis of data from the NORC General Social Surveys, and found mixed support for the hypothesis that those who watch more television will have more sexist views. However, Signorielli

also pointed out the flaw in her study. "There has been an overall striking trend between the 1970s and 1980s for fewer respondents to agree with sexist statements" (p. 359). Whether respondents truly didn't agree with sexist statements or merely lied was not addressed.

Sapolsky and Tabarlet (1991) took a close look at different categories of primetime sex, ranging from innuendo to criminal sex acts. Comparing the sexual content of 64 shows from 1979 and 1989, the researchers found that television had not altered its sexual content to address 1990s sexual concerns such as AIDS, contraception, and caution. Sapolsky and Tabarlet concluded that teenage viewers may be getting a vision of a sexual world, which "is noted for its over emphasis on sexual activity between unmarried characters, and a disregard for safe sex" (p. 514). Sapolsky and Tabarlet did admit, however, that the context of sexuality was not addressed, and that their sample of programs was probably too limited.

Even with its limitations, content analysis is the preferred method for gathering data concerning *what* audiences are watching on MTV. Much of the content analysis related to MTV has been done on violence in rock videos. This may be because of the assumption that violence abounds on MTV, but it does not necessarily mean that violence is any easier to measure through content analysis than other factors. "Usually there is room for debate about the reliability, validity, or appropriateness of the chosen indicator or about the certainty of any conclusions drawn about the level of performance" (McQuail, 1990, p. 181).

Obviously, how a researcher codes images affects the outcome of the research. Researchers looking at violent images on MTV must consider a number of indicators.

> The portrayal of 'violence' in media is often measured, but requires attention not only to the presence, absence or degree of any violent act portrayed, but also to the content, the degree of realism, the question of implied approval or disapproval, the typical characteristics of perpetrator and victim, the possible types of violence, the legitimacy or not of the act and still further aspects. (Gerbner & Gross, 1976, p.175)

Sherman and Dominick (1986) used content analysis to measure violence and sex in rock videos sampled from MTV, "Night Tracks," and "Friday Night Videos." Out of the 42 hours of videos taped, 200 of them were performance videos, which were not used in the study. The decision to exclude performance videos left the researchers with 166 concept videos, or only 45 % of the total sample. Out of this sample within a sample, Sherman and Dominick concluded that "music videos are violent, male-oriented, and laden with sexual content" (p. 92). The researchers also found MTV to be "sexier than the other two sources, with more instances of sexual activity and more nontraditional sexual content." These findings, however, are only related to the videos' images, not to the song lyrics.

Gow (1991) points out that there are some flaws in Sherman and Dominick's content analysis, saying that it failed "to account for the different ways in which viewers might have perceived the imagery contained in the videos." One video, ZZ Top's "Legs," was found to be one of the most violent videos in the sample, yet Sherman and Dominick didn't mention that the video was a parody on a Cinderella story, which might have impacted on the interpretation of the sex and violence: "What's more, they

made no attempt to account for how audience perceptions of this material might similarly have been affected by the audience members' awareness that they were watching a 'music video' rather than a 'newscast' or 'situation comedy'" (p. 38).

Caplan (1985) found in his study of 15 hours of music videos taped from MTV that, while women are not being singled out as victims of violence in music videos, "the overall level of violence is much higher than in commercial television" (p. 146). However, this study, like Sherman and Dominick's, also failed to take into account the context of the violence in the videos.

Kalis and Neuendorf (1989) measured "potentially perceived aggressive cues," which were defined as "the occurrence(s) (video or audio) of objects or events actually occurring or simulated representing physical harm or the threat thereof" (p. 150). As in the previous studies mentioned, song lyrics were not included in the coding.

Kalis and Neuendorf found different findings from Caplan (1985) and Sherman and Dominick (1986), saying that "aggressive cues may be less prominent in music videos than common criticisms would lead one to believe" (p.153). This study found that "nearly 40% of the videos in the sample contained no validated aggressive cues" (p.153). Kalis and Neuendorf also pointed out that three of the top four most aggressive videos contained pro-social messages, indicating that this study did take the context of the individual videos into account.

Although measuring violence is probably the most popular route for content analysis on MTV, sexism is also a popular theme. Vincent, Davis and

Boruszkowski (1987), used 30 hours of videos from MTV to study how women were portrayed in rock videos. Their results indicated that sexism and the predominance of stereotypical, traditional gender roles is fairly high in music videos. As far as violence went, Vincent et al. concluded that while there is " a fairly high level (34%) of violence, it is not very blatant. Outright meanness and holocaustic death and destruction just does not occur in most videos. Only 10% of our videos portrayed any violence against women" (p. 755).

Vincent (1989) continued this area of research with a follow-up study, to determine if the increase in public awareness on rock video content had had any effect on the sexism found in Vincent et al.'s 1987 study. Using the same technique as in 1987, Vincent (1989) found that while sexism was still "fairly high," the presence of more female rock musicians had lowered the frequency of level one (a condescending view of women as brainless Playboy bunnies) images by 22 percent, down from 54.6% to 41.8%. Overall, however, Vincent wrote that "we find that females were still portrayed as submissive, passive and physically attractive. In fact, we found small increases in the use of lingerie and lingerie adaptations, nudity and violence" (p. 160).

In the final analysis, content analysis appears extremely useful for examining the video content of MTV, but only if the coding is more efficient and inclusive. The viewing of a video on MTV, for example, may evoke a different meaning for a viewer than if it is on "Friday Night Videos," just because of the 24-hour, MTV format. The context of the individual videos, including the content of the song lyrics, nuances in storyline and even

imagery in a performance video are all indicators to be considered when studying MTV.

Seminology and Critical Studies

MTV is obviously a complex medium, a mixture of radio and television. It is also a medium with inconsistent content. Unlike network television, which has specific categories of programming such as situation comedies, dramas, and thrillers, specific categories are not as clear cut on MTV. Each video is like a three-to-five minute show, and many of the videos contain techniques more common to film than television. Thus, some researchers have found it convenient to abandon quantitative studies when examining MTV, looking at the channel, and the videos it shows, from a more critical, culturally based standpoint.

Seminology, or semiotics, is the study of sign-systems present in culture. These sign-systems are included in texts, such as literature, films, and television, and involve the signifier (what is seen or heard) and the signified (the concept invoked by the individual viewing or hearing the signifier). Although seminology is most often applied in terms of linguistics or grammatical syntax, "it has the special advantage of being applicable to 'texts' which involve more than one sign system and signs (e.g. visual texts and sounds) for which there is no established 'grammar' and no available dictionary" (McQuail, 1990, p. 187).

Seminology, then, is an effective tool for studying MTV. Seminology helps to uncover the "cultural meaning" of media content by helping scholars to describe the content and explain media effects in a qualitative fashion (McQuail, p. 187).

Fry and Fry (1987) used seminology to look at the encoding and decoding of MTV, examining whether the signs created by MTV pushed for the cultural status quo (code-abiding) or challenged cultural norms (code-making). What they found was that "the content of MTV is style. The videos broadcast on MTV are constructed as closed texts in that they are crafted to attract an already existing audience with known characteristics " (p. 234).

Thus, to MTV's target audience, consisting primarily of adolescents, MTV's "content of style" merely reinforces teenage cultural norms, which contain qualities both of rebellion and belonging. The MTV text, Fry and Fry found, usually had very little to do with the song lyrics itself, and the text only made sense if "one views style as the topic or content of the video" (p. 235).

Fry and Fry's conclusions help to explain much about the conflicts surrounding MTV, especially between parents and teenagers. A parent is simply going to decode an MTV video differently from her/his teenager, because the parent is not part of the target audience (p. 237). Fry and Fry also found that MTV was a unique blend of television and advertising, linking personal connection on the part of teenagers to consumption of goods (p. 239).

MTV and music videos embody a new art form which critical researchers find fascinating. Jones (1988) called the MTV narrative form digital narrative, and quoted Fiske's (1986) assessment of MTV as "a mosaic of

fragments" as evidence for this. Digital narrative is bits of information that can be processed and reproduced in any way that the director sees fit, thus breaking linear rules of narrative. Videos which use digital narrative often employ images which have nothing to do with the song itself, and don't even show the musicians themselves. If a video does show the musicians, it often depicts them in many different locations, "cutting from one place to another as if time and space are irrelevant" (p. 19).

Jones concluded that videos are "cohesive but not coherent" (p. 20), pointing out that a viewer must reconstruct these bits of images together into something of meaning. This extremely subjective reconstruction, Jones suggested, undermines the videos' potential to transmit cultural meaning:

> The implication for memory is startling. How can digital narrative effectively transmit culture if its meanings are so variable? How can shared meanings exist in such a narrative form? Is memory becoming less an organized set of experiences, meanings and images, and becoming more a fragmented collection of conscious and unconscious data triggered at will or at random? (p. 26)

Lorch (1988), however, saw this disjointed narrative as enabling music videos to invoke greater meaning, saying that "properly understood, rock videos are the metaphysical poetry of the twentieth century" (p. 143). Lorch found that music video uses music, images, and discursive language to express meanings impossible to elaborate upon if restricted to only one form of communication. Although she admitted that videos "might seem confusing, rough, disjointed, curiously discontinuous to someone expecting a mini-musical, but it is through these images that significant meaning emerges" (pp. 151-52).

Kaplan (1987) called this lack of coherent flow "postmodern." Not all videos, she noted, are "postmodern," for videos are divided up into genres very much the way films are. "Postmodern" videos, she asserted, are a pastiche of genres which know no sacred cows. Unlike network television, videos use and mix freely images from both high art, such as Dadaism, German Expressionism and Surrealism, and low art offerings such a gangster and horror films (p. 46). While this mixing flies in the face of convention, it also is a montage of schizophrenic images that give no point of reference to the viewer.

Added to this confusion is the 24-hour format of MTV itself, that gives no end in sight to this onslaught of incoherent images. Kaplan also maintained that MTV's format keeps audiences watching by "locking the spectator into the hypnotized state of impending satisfaction" (p. 47). "Postmodern" videos, by giving the viewer no coherence and no "place" within the video, leave the viewer decentered and dissatisfied, waiting for the next video, "where perhaps closure will take place" (p. 63). Aufderheide (1986) agreed, saying that the moods created by MTV "often express a lack, an incompletion, an instability, a searching for location" (p. 118). This idea lends some credence to normative critics who contend that MTV is addictive.

Feminist researchers often go beyond form, coding and coherence to discuss more political issues. Kaplan (1987) maintained that the "gaze" within MTV is a primarily male one, viewing women either in a stereotypical romantic way, both worshipping and objectifying them, or in a new, postmodern way, that shows women not as domestic mothers but as women appropriating masculine traits like violence, consumption, and

phallic sexuality (p. 150). Kaplan did, however, give some credit to women artists as raising the image of women in video to a higher, more independent level which flies in the face of convention.

Lewis (1990) picks up on this hopeful theme regarding women in rock video. She asserted that female musicians' videos on MTV have created a niche in this new art form for female fans.

Lewis found that MTV and its content focus mainly on the male adolescent discourse, "through a broad system of images that evokes boys' privileged position both in relation to their female adolescent peers and to the adult male role" (p. 6). Music video's preoccupation with the street signifies "boys' quests for adventure, rebellion, sexual encounter, peer relations, and male privilege" (p. 6). Images of girls and women in these videos, then, are mere window dressing, stuck into the montage not as participants but as part of adolescent male fantasy. Lewis asserted that, although network spokespersons maintain that MTV is directed towards a "youth audience," it is actually a "male youth audience": "In the case of male address on MTV, the hegemony of gender inequality and male adolescence becomes manifest in the way MTV excludes girls from male discourse, and in their coded and semiotically impoverished representation" (p. 6).

Some hope is offered for images of women on MTV. Lewis pointed to women artists as the saviors of female image in rock video. Such musicians produce what Lewis terms "female address videos," which are directed primarily at women viewers. Female address videos use two "interrelated textual sign systems:" access signs and discovery signs (p. 6). Access signs allow girls to enter male territory, such as the street, and claim it as theirs too.

Discovery signs celebrate the activities which differentiate women from men and boys from girls, showing such stereotypical female pastimes as gossiping, slumber parties and shopping in positive terms. Lewis used videos like Madonna's "Borderline," Tina Turner's "What's Love Got To Do With It," and Pat Benatar's "Love Is A Battlefield" as examples of these phenomena. While many critics argue that such female actions on MTV are related only to the desire to please males, Lewis contended that this type of criticism simply reproduces "male bias in cultural criticism" (p. 8).

Lewis isn't the only feminist critic who celebrates Madonna as an artist dedicated to redefining female address in rock video. Freccero (1992), devoted an entire article to readings of Madonna's video offerings. She wrote:

> Madonna plays with the codes of femininity to undo dominant gender codes and to assert her own power and agency (and, by extension, that of women, in general), not by rejecting the feminine but by adopting it as a masquerade; that is, by posing as feminine. (p. 170)

Although Freccero praises the codes within Madonna's videos , she also acknowledged the "self-aggrandizement these fantasies serve" (p. 182). She applied this to MTV generally, writing:

> MTV reveals its political inadequacies in the very postmodernism of its premise: It is the individual, or the private subject, who makes cultural meaning, rather than communities or collectivities, and individuals may become empowered through those meanings. (pp. 182-83)

While these critical observations are intriguing and provide insight, their weakness is in their specificity. Gow (1991) wrote: "How is one to know, for example, whether the particular videos they selected for analysis provide an adequate representation of music video as a general media form?" (p. 40)

Another flaw is that these critical researchers too often restrict their perusal of the videos to the visual level, rather than examining the aural as well.

Directions for Further Research

It is tempting to dismiss MTV as mere advertising and its content as mass marketing for teenage boys. Yet, MTV goes beyond advertisement. Yes, the video clips are ads for rock albums, designed to pique the viewer's interest in a particular artist or group. However, music videos do not use overt sales pitches or hard sell techniques, preferring to discreetly display the artist's name, song title, and recording company in the lower left hand corner of the screen at the beginning and end of the video. Also, videos, unlike commercials, can be viewed again and again with no viewer burnout. Viewers often wait for a chance to see their favorite videos, something they would never do for commercials (Gow, 1991). Additionally, videos have become products which consumers purchase for viewing, again something which never happens with ordinary ads (Aufderheide, 1986, p. 116).

MTV may well be an entirely new medium. Some researchers have even called it an "art form." Trying to analyze this relatively new medium, which combines the visual and aural into complex, often disjointed texts, is no easy feat.

Cultivation theory demonstrates teenagers look to television for guidance in matters of behavior and sexuality. Some television portrayals of gender roles, if heavily viewed, seem to have a slight effect upon attitudes of adults (Signiorelli, 1987). Baran (1976), for example, found a significant

relationship between television portrayals of sex and teenage expectations about first-time sexual encounters.

Other studies have found that teenagers use MTV for visual clues to songs' inner meanings (Sun & Lull, 1986), and that MTV has the potential to be a powerful influence upon teenage attitudes regarding violence and premarital sex (Greeson & Williams, 1986). If MTV's Robert Pittman is right, and MTV "owns" 14-year-olds, then MTV's video content and the messages within it may be, in a small way, affecting teenage attitudes regarding sexuality and gender roles.

In order to discover what exactly teenagers *are* watching that *may* influence them, an in-depth study examining sexist content and gender roles on MTV is necessary. The problem is no recent measurement of sexual images and gender roles on MTV exists. Much of the research presented in this paper is at least three years old, and much of the content analysis studies which closely examine content date back well into the 1980s. The 1980s were a different time in history, and it is not unreasonable to suggest that the video content presented on MTV in the 1980s would reflect the values and cultural attitudes of that decade, not of the present one. MTV has changed its face to adjust to the 1990s. As a network, it has become actively involved in politics, environmental issues, and AIDS awareness. MTV no longer just means rock and roll, although many viewers may indeed still view it as such.

MTV has also added a new musical genre since many of the aforementioned studies were completed: rap. Rap music simply was not shown on MTV before 1989. It is possible that its inclusion has changed the sexist and violent content of MTV's videos. Other musical genres, such as

grunge, hip-hop, and speed metal, are extremely male-oriented musical genres which often ignore women completely.

Combining some of the approaches discussed in this review would be an ideal approach for studying MTV. For instance, critical studies took an in-depth look at specific videos, giving a definite context to the images which were discussed. Although many of the content analysis studies presented in this paper seem flawed because they exclude performance videos, fail to take the context of a video into account, or ignore whatever link there might be between the song lyrics and the images, content analysis is still an efficient method for gathering a large body of videos for study. The coding, taken from a previous study, could be modified, and become an aid for a detailed critical section, which would help give a context and shape to this highly visual medium.

Vincent, Davis and Boruszlowski (1987) and Vincent (1989) used a coding scheme which was the most inclusive for measuring sexism on MTV. The same coding, a scale from one through four measuring different levels of sexism, was used for both studies. This coding allowed for examination of not only sexist images, but empowering ones as well, in which women were portrayed as fully equal beings whose gender was not significant. This study also took into account the gender of the musician, to determine whether this affected the presentation of women or not. This inclusion fits in nicely with Lewis' (1990) assertion that female musicians included more empowering images of women in videos.

This study would also take into account the number of videos which do not include women at all, as less representation certainly does not mean

equal or nonsexist representation. The inclusion of female images on MTV videos may be less than it was during the 1980s, partially because of the popularity of male-oriented music genres like rap and grunge.

In the 1990s, MTV has not come under the same kind of heavy criticism it received in the 1980s. Perhaps the content is not considered as controversial, perhaps sexism and violence on the channel has decreased, or perhaps the bloom is now off the rose after 12 years on the air. Viewers, however, are still tuning in, videos are still being produced, and MTV's advertising revenue is expected to reach $182 million this year (*The Wall Street Journal*, 1993).

Method

The method used in this study is critical analysis, allowing for an intensive look at MTV video content. However, Gow (1992) points out, "how is one to know whether the particular videos they selected for analysis provide an adequate representation of music video as a general media form?" (p. 40) Thus, rather than hand-picking individual videos for the study, content analysis methods were employed in order to obtain a large sample. From this large, scientifically gathered sample, individual videos are rated on a sexism scale and discussed in the critical analysis chapter.

The sampling frame was limited to music videos aired on MTV, rather than its sister channel VH-1, because MTV is designed for the teenage demographic group, shows the newest videos, and has the most rapid video turnover. VH-1, by contrast, is aimed at an older demographic group and shows more soft rock, country, and older music videos. VH-1 is the geriatric version of MTV and not on the cutting edge of music video culture.

The MTV programming was recorded onto VHS videotapes; perhaps the most difficult part of this process was learning to program the VCR correctly. A random cluster sample of videos was drawn from MTV over a three-month period, mid-January through mid-March of 1994, which allowed for a sample of 118 videos. The sample was taken from 24 hours of MTV programming, using sequential two-hour periods, beginning at midnight, on sequential days each week for 12 weeks.

In order to record sexist imagery in an organized fashion, the study utilized a four-level sexism scale used by Vincent (1989) and Vincent, Davis and Boruszkowski (1987). This scale was adapted by these researchers from a

scale which was originally designed to test for sexism in print advertisements. Vincent et al. found this scale a "useful measurement for examining the diverse sex role portrayals found in rock videos" (1987, p. 752). The study reduced the scale to a four-item ordinal scale that measures how women are portrayed in specific roles and relationships. This coding corresponds to a scale of different levels, rated from one to four. While Vincent et al. applied this particular coding scheme to women only, this researcher modified it to apply to men as well. This scale, because of the range of themes and storylines found in rock videos, encompasses both sexuality and gender roles.

The basic coding scale:

Level 1: "Condescending." The woman is portrayed as being sexually objectified, as less than a person, and as a two-dimensional image present only for male enjoyment. This includes a Playboy bunny image, a dumb blonde, a victim, or a predatory seductress. The man is portrayed as a sculpted sex object, a dumb jock, or a male who exists only for sexual enjoyment. Videos which show only specific female or male body parts will be included in this category. Sexual violence, seductive clothing, underwear and lingerie is included in this level.

Level 2: "Keep Her Place" or "Act Like a Man." Some strengths and skills of women are acknowledged, but the woman is still kept in a stereotypical womanly role. Romantically, she is still shown as being subservient, and her sexuality still heavily stressed. Men are portrayed as being aggressive, loud, commanding, and controlling. They are shown doing physical activities associated with stereotypical male culture, like hanging out

together without women, or participating in dangerous sports. Male sexuality is presented in an aggressive manner, often as the women's expense.

Level 3: "Contradictory." Women play a dual role here, with very conflicting messages. Any show of independence on the woman's part is at the expense of her feminine role. Example: Woman becomes successful, she loses man. Conflicts between sexuality and independence are also in this category, like when Madonna is tied up of her own choice and enjoys it. Men also play a dual role, in which sensitivity and vulnerability lead to a loss of the girl, pride, or manhood.

Level 4: "Fully Equal." Both men and women are treated as people, with no mention of private life. Sexual dominance have nothing to do with being a man, while subservience and objectification have nothing to do with being a woman. Completely non-stereotypical.

An additional category accounts for the absence of images of women in the music video.

A sample music video tally sheet is included in Appendix A of this thesis.

Once the sample was collected over the 12-week period, each individual video was coded by the researcher. A second coder coded six of the 24 hours of MTV programming, with an intercoder reliability of 89 percent. Individual videos were only coded once, with no repeats. Repeated videos accounted for 45 of the 118 videos in the sample. An additional 19 of the 118 videos didn't include any images of women and could not be used for the critical analysis. Thus, this analysis is based on 54 videos.

The number of videos gathered in the 24-hour sample was surprisingly low. In Vincent's (1989) study, 50 hours of programming garnered 570 videos. In Vincent, Davis and Boruszkowski's (1987), almost 30 hours of programming yielded 300 videos. Obviously, the number of videos played per hour on MTV has greatly decreased since the 1980s, giving this study a far smaller sample size. Fortunately, this study does not require a large sample for quantitative statistical analysis, so the relatively small sample size is not a huge burden.

For this study, the tally marks for the Level I category, "Condescending," are the most important. Videos were grouped according to the scores they received in the Level I category into three groups: 0-5, 6-10, 11-up. This typology makes it easy to group and analyze videos ranging from most to least sexist. Individual videos, usually at the extreme end of each group, were chosen for further study and discussion.

The critical section analyzes different videos in four ways: through the analysis of the researcher, the critical feminist literature on the subject, an individual interview with a creative force behind one of the videos, and viewer opinions garnered from the Internet system.

An interview with music video director Keir McFarlane (October 13, 1994) is included in the critical section. McFarlane directed the video "Mary Jane's Last Dance" by Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers, a video with a high-sexism rating. The interview included these questions:

1. What was the creative process behind the video's storyline and themes? Did the artist play a large creative role?

2. If the artist did play a creative role, did that artist have a specific agenda in terms of what he/she wanted to address regarding gender?

3. How much did promotional and financial concerns impact creative concerns?

4. Did you consciously choose to shoot the women in the video in a particular way?

5. Do you feel that videos are capable of getting certain message across to the viewer, or are music videos largely subjective?

6. What do you think the role of music video is? Is it largely an advertising medium, or is it a creative outlet for artists like yourself? Can it be both? What about an educational medium? Does this concern come into play at all?

Although this study is just the beginning in terms of research which could be done on MTV content (the "Beavis and Butthead Show," with its limited attention span and anti-social messages, comes to mind), it is one of the first in-depth looks at this genre since the late 1980s. By combining scholarly voices with the practical concerns of video production, this study sheds light on the question of why music videos show the images they show. Additionally, by including the voices of music video fans from the Internet, this study attempts to bridge the gap between what scholars analyze and what the viewers actually see. Research utilizing the Internet system is quite new. Although it cannot be labeled as anything more than a self-selecting sample of educated, college-aged, middle-class individuals, including this type of research in this study may prove to be more than simply a cyberpunk diversion.

Critical Analysis

After viewing 24 hours of MTV, it appears that its content has changed since the 1980s. When Vincent, Davis and Boruszkowski (1987) and Vincent (1989) did their sweeping content analysis studies of MTV, they taped 30 hours of MTV and recorded over 200 videos. In this study, 24 hours of taping around the clock garnered only 118 videos, and many of those were repeats. Obviously, MTV has changed its format since the 1980s, depending more heavily on its independently produced shows, its sit-coms, "Speed Racer" repeats, and other programming. Videos are now just one of MTV's attractions, rather than its main focus.

However, this format change did not mean that MTV has reduced its sexist imagery. The channel is still rife with objectified images of women. However, the context of these women, placed within the videos, is just as important as the images themselves. Merely counting sexist images only gives part of the picture; interpretation of sexist images promotes better understanding of the images' context within the videos.

Music videos are a complex medium, and they hold very little in common with anything else on television. Music videos are actually closer to being short films than anything else. Film students and aspiring directors now often look to the music video as a forum for their undiscovered talents. The realm of music video has attracted cinematic directors such as Brian de Palma, Martin Scorsese, and John Landis.

Because of the close relationship between music video and film, videos cannot be read in the same way as a critic might read, say, a situation comedy. Most network and commercial television programming is shot in

formatted ways, expressly for the television screen. Television aims specifically for a suspension of disbelief on the viewer's part, so viewers forget they are watching a television show. Self-conscious or self-reflective direction, which might draw the viewer's attention back to the medium itself rather than to the show, is not desirable.

Music videos, however, break all the conventions of television on a regular basis. Kaplan's (1987) idea of a "post modern " video, which has no storyline and is a pastiche of visual images linked by the song, is structural anathema to television programming. Many music videos, with their non-narrative formats and fast-paced editing, would probably be considered unwatchable by television standards.

Music videos, then, are really a meld between the creativity of film and the accessibility of television. They carry with them the film camera techniques, the advanced editing, and sophisticated film themes , and then they are broadcast 24 hours a day, accessible to all. However, along with the film techniques, music videos also bring with them the film industry's traditionally male view of women and sexuality. MTV is still a man's world.

Videos 11-Up--High Levels of Sexism

In this study, the videos are divided into three groups, according to the number of Level 1 images recorded from each video. Videos with a score of 11 or greater are examined first. There were 18 of these high-sexism videos. These are videos which are full of objectified, stereotypical images of women, but it is too simple to just give them a sexism score and leave it at that.

The relationship between the female image, the camera, and the spectator is a complex one, and has always been such. Even before the camera was invented, primarily male painters and artists objectified the female form in their artistic efforts. The female image these artists created were usually passive ones, staring out of the picture self-consciously, as if the image was created to be looked at and consumed by a largely male viewing audience. The crux of this relationship was that because men controlled artistic expression for most of history, men controlled the way women were presented in the art, and thus created art which was created by men, for men.

The highly visual medium of film has been simply an extension of the male gaze present in art. Mulvey (1975) calls this the "system of looks," which is created by the triangular system of the camera/projector, cinematic image of the woman, and spectator. Mulvey calls the cinematic woman's body "the site of sight," meaning that the body is there to be looked at, and thus presents a distraction within a narrative format. Although the woman's body may be an object of desire and pursuit, she is also the constant on screen object of spectacle.

While it would seem that women spectators would be left out of this viewing loop because this "site of sight" has been created through a male sensibility, this alienation doesn't really occur. Rabinowitz (1990) describes the entire viewing phenomenon in this way:

> This positioning of the female body as fetishized object of the gaze constructs a male spectator for the female spectacle both within the film and within the audience. In effect, the woman's body is everywhere one looks on the screen; yet it is nowhere to be found among the spectators, whose gaze has been relentlessly constructed as that of masculine voyeur. (p.152)

This dynamic helps to explain why female spectators will accept sexist, stereotypical images of their own gender. It is perhaps why women's fashion magazines are full of scantily clad women in often humiliating poses. Female spectators have been conditioned to view these images in the same way as men; they have been given no choice, as there are few alternative images of women. For instance, when the camera focuses on Kim Novak in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo,* the spectator sees her through Jimmy Stewart's eyes, and if the spectator happens to be female, she has to make a quick attitude adjustment or is left unable to relate to the film at all.

The main difference between cinematic film and music videos isn't really the length. The difference lies in the virtual absence of dialogue in music videos. A music video is dependent upon the visual to get its message across, and almost all its information is visually transmitted. This means that, particularly in videos by male musicians, images of women are truly only images, with no substance or character to back them up. In the high sexism score videos, women are window dressing, sex toys, and the mute recipients of the male gaze. Once they have fulfilled this purpose within the video, they are usually dismissed.

Perhaps the best example of this is the latest Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers video, "Mary Jane's Last Dance." The visual storyline of the video is a highly narrative one that is also highly ambiguous in terms of meaning.

The video opens in the dim light of a morgue. Petty, dressed in a white lab coat, looks bored on a slow night. His coroner associate works on a body a few tables down. Suddenly, a new body bag is brought in. Petty opens it.

Inside is the body of a beautiful blonde woman (the actress Kim Basinger). Her lips are blue and her eyes are closed, but this doesn't stop Petty from caressing her mouth. Under suspicious glances from his associate, Petty zips up her bag and steals her body from the morgue, taking her to his spooky house on some ocean cliffs. Once he gets her body inside, he unzips the bag, sits her down on the couch, and tries to keep her head upright so that she can watch TV. After her head flops to the side, Petty gets discouraged, and leaves the room. The next scene opens in a dining room, where she sits limply at the head of a sumptuous table, dressed in a wedding gown. Petty smears lipstick onto her mouth. In the next scene, Petty dances with her, dragging her body around a floor covered with candles. Her limbs fling about as they dance. Finally, Petty picks her up and carries her down the cliffs to the ocean. He places her body in the water and leaves. As a wave washes over her face, her body rises to the surface, and her eyes open in a blank stare.

There is probably no more effective way to objectify someone than by turning them into a literal object. Because "Mary Jane" is dead, she is only a character in the video because of her appearance. She cannot speak, she has no facial expression, and she cannot move. All the attributes which make a human being expressive are denied her. "Mary Jane" is seen only through Petty's eyes, and exists solely for Petty's pleasure; he can steal her, dress her up, throw her around, and finally throw her away. He could even have sexual intercourse with her in any way he wants, although this is not seen in the video.

In the video, there is a great deal of ambiguity regarding Petty's motivation for stealing her in the first place. Yes, she is beautiful, if a bit blue,

but there must be more to this story. Is she an old flame or a former prom queen? Did they have a relationship, or was he just an admirer? Perhaps his motivation is necrophilia. Her eyes opening at the end is even more puzzling. Is she still dead, or did Petty, as in Snow White, awaken her through his attentions? One wonders, then, why she would wait to wake up until after he leaves. Perhaps his attentions weren't so tender or innocent.

Brown and Schulze (1990) point out that "meanings and pleasures are not in texts; they are produced in the act of viewing and reading... A popular text, therefore, is ideologically messy--a semiotic terrain that opens itself to cultural struggle over meaning" (pp.88-89). The interpretation of a text like "Mary Jane's Last Dance," or any text, really depends upon who is reading it. There is a multiplicity of readings within one text.

For example, a question regarding the sexist content of "Mary Jane's Last Dance" was sent out over the rec.music.video newsgroup of the Internet system. This newsgroup allows various fans of music videos from across the country to speak online to each other about video related topics. The question was:

> Do you know of any sexist videos on MTV right now? I'm doing a graduate thesis on images of women on MTV and I want some viewer opinions. by sexist, I mean objectified images of women and men, in which they are presented as toys or mere window dressing for the musicians. For example, do you think Kim Basinger's dead character in "Mary Jane's Last Dance" is a sexist, objectified image. do you think these sexist images have any effect on you and your behavior? Do you view men or women differently after watching these types of videos?

The question garnered two interesting interpretations of the video:

> Kim Basinger is not objectified. In the video, she plays Petty's wife. They both get in an accident and go to the morgue, thought to be dead. But he wakes from the dead. Since he woke from the dead, he thinks

> she will too, so he brings her back to their home. But she doesn't wake from death, and he finally gives up and lays to rest in the ocean. As he leaves, she wakes in the water. (Jeffrey Allan Miller, April, 1994)
>
> Your example lacks support for the argument you're trying to make. You should watch Petty's video a couple more times and maybe hear the lyrics. It's about a man and a woman. Both die. He comes back to life. She doesn't. He tries to to bring her back to life by taking her home. Still she doesn't. He gives up on the idea. Takes her to the ocean and lets her rest. As soon as he departs, she wakes up. What's so sexist about that???? (Mark Shneyder, April, 1994)

Although Miller (1994) and Shneyder (1994) were quite adamant about their interpretations being correct, they are actually far from the truth. Director Keir McFarlane directed and wrote the storyboard for "Mary Jane's Last Dance," and in the video Petty is a body thief, not Basinger's husband. "It was a love story, really. What I was trying to get at was that Petty's character was going to save this particular body from the mortician's knife because he is taken with her" (personal interview with Keir McFarlane, October 13, 1994).

The video which appeared constantly in the sample wasn't even the video which McFarlane originally envisioned or edited. When McFarlane found out that Petty was interested in making a video, he sent him a storyboard. Petty initially rejected it because he was cast as the mortician, and "was concerned that he would come across as a control freak and a pervert" (1994). McFarlane changed the casting, making Petty into a morgue worker. McFarlane also imposed a bit of self-censorship, ruling out his desire to make Petty be affectionate with the deceased. Shots of Petty kissing Basinger on the cheek and hand, present in the original video storyboard (McFarlane, 1993), were cut from the production.

Between Petty's management being concerned over the musician's iamge and MTV "freaking out over sex," the video was eventually taken out

of McFarlane's hands and "sliced up by MTV." McFarlane felt that MTV cut the story out of the video, leaving it jumpy and hard to follow. Shots of surgical instruments at the beginning of the video were cut. So were shots of embalmed animals inside Petty's home. On the subject of censorship, McFarlane had this to say:

> MTV is the most difficult to work with. It always demands some sort of censorship now. It's ok on MTV for a bimbo to be on a beach and dancing lasciviously in front of the camera, but not for her to be groped from behind by a guy. Why, I don't know. (1994)

McFarlane also said that the production of "Mary Jane's Last Dance" was different from many other video shoots. According to McFarlane, an average video has a budget of $75,000-$100,000, and one to two days in which to shoot it. "Mary Jane" had a $250,000 budget, and a three-day shoot schedule. The extra money and time gave McFarlane and his production team the chance to build sets, go on location, and hire a name actress for the female role. Many other videos don't have these luxeries, and must depend upon obligatory shots of the musicians with women wiggling in the background.

What is missing in the MTV version of "Mary Jane," according to McFarlane, is the idea that Petty wishes to save Basinger from the knife, and wants to be tender with her. There is barely an implication in this video that Petty would like his captive to be active, and that he doesn't necessarily enjoy manipulating her constantly. Unfortunately, the MTV version of the video is too disjointed to convey nuance. This is frustrating for McFarlane, who says: "What I want to do is tell stories" (1994).

At least one critic didn't care for the story McFarlane was trying to tell. The *Los Angeles Times* music video columnist Chris Willman had this to say regarding "Mary Jane's Last Dance":

> Not since Alice Cooper's 'Cold Ethyl' have the joys of necrophilia gotten such an earnest airing in the pop mainstream, and the utterly purposeless perversity places this one high in the all-time music video *what-the-hell-were-they-thinking?* pantheon, ruining a perfectly good little Petty tune. (1994, p.17)

In some ways, Mary Jane is far more of an active female character, dead, than many of the other female video characters are alive. Rap singer Snoop Doggy Dogg's video, "Gin and Juice," which enjoyed 12 weeks of heavy airplay, is a good example of throwaway female characters, who exist only to compliment the male singer's masculine universe.

"Gin and Juice" is a highly narrative video, which opens in Snoop's fictional house in South Central Los Angeles. His parents are going on a trip, and nag at Snoop to get out of his pajamas and get a job. After they depart, Snoop calls all his friends over for a party. This news is big; it gets one friend off the toilet, while another buddy abandons his female lover in bed for the festivities which await him at Snoop's. The next scenes are a montage of images from life in the ghetto. Snoop sits on his front porch, surrounded by women, while one of them braids his hair. Two women fight over him on the front lawn, savagely clawing each other until the cops arrive. Snoop drives around aimlessly with a pretty girl at his side. Once the party gets going, a parade of women file into a bedroom, with Snoop following them in and shutting the door. Finally, after an extended dancing scene, Snoop's parents arrive home early. They have been arguing in the car, and are hardly

happy to see the blowout at their house. They run into the house and throw everyone out. The video ends.

Clearly, "Gin and Juice" is making a clear statement about Snoop's socio-economic class and his race. What is not clear is whether Snoop is trying to draw attention to the treatment of women within his so-called world, or whether the presentation of women within this video represent the artist's actual attitude toward women. In this video, women are interchangeable objects who exist to serve and service men. Snoop is never shown with the same woman twice, and the camera barely lingers on them beyond displaying the pretty faces and tight bodies. In some ways, this video shows women as being far less than the narrative distraction that Mulvey (1975) theorized; women are less important than furniture, and indeed not even worth fighting over. In "Gin and Juice," Snoop himself becomes the object of pursuit, as women fight over him and women are abandoned because of him. The male characters would rather be with Snoop than have sex. The female characters risk getting arrested fighting over Snoop's attentions, yet they apparently have no problem being herded into a bedroom and sharing him there.

"Gin and Juice" shares some striking similarities regarding its treatment of women with the works of African-American director, Spike Lee. Critic Julianne Malveaux (1991), said of Lee that "Spike has a bad case of spite against women: he neither sees them nor shows them as well-rounded characters"(p. 78). She points out that Lee's female characters are either stereotypes, fishwives, or invisible, and that he has a "basic disregard and

contempt for women...The message seems to be that women are interchangeable" (p.80).

Snoop Doggy Dogg's treatment of women in "Gin and Juice" and in his other hit video, "What's My Name," mimic Lee's contempt for women. One woman is as good as another at the party in "Gin and Juice." In "What's My Name" (another high sexism video), the video opens with Snoop sitting in bed with a black woman, whose father is throwing a fit downstairs over the Dogg's presence in his daughter's bed. The woman responds by saying to Snoop, "You know I love you," to which he responds, "You don't love me. You just love my doggie style," in a clear message of dismissal. After saying this, he "morphs" into a Doberman Pinscher and runs out of the house, abandoning her to her father's wrath.

Other highly rated sexist videos do not have the same narrative format as "Mary Jane's Last Dance" and "Gin and Juice," which makes the flashing images of these more postmodern videos confusing to read, and often seem more objectifying because there is no context in which to place the images. For example, Counting Crows' hit video "Mr. Jones" cuts between the band playing in the living room of a Victorian apartment and flashes of women simply standing and staring into the camera. These women could be mannequins, for all the emotion they show on camera. The lead singer sings, "...We stare at the beautiful women. They're looking at you, no they're looking at me," while these women's faces and bodies are flashed again and again. This video is about looking, about voyeurism, and the women being looked at are passive, emotionless statues. They exist for visual consumption.

Many of the other highly sexist videos approach the subject of women in precisely this way, although they may not contain lyrics that actually spell it out for the viewer. The metal band Guns 'N' Roses (G N'R) have two videos that demonstrate this use of the video as voyeurism, although in this band's case perhaps voyeurism seems to be too strong a word. The members of this band, at least on their videos, appear to have even less use for women than Snoop Doggy Dogg. While Snoop may deign to use women for sex, the rockers of G N' R would rather admire themselves.

In the G N' R video, "Patience," a love song is turned into a shallow joke. "Patience" appears to be a song about trying to keep together a relationship while out on the road, but the video shows band member after band member in different hotel rooms with interchangeable women. Often, one woman will suddenly vanish from the frame and be replaced by another, and the band member won't even notice. In one scene, lead guitarist Slash lounges on his bed while a voluptuous young woman in lingerie tries to get his attention. What is her competition? A big boa constrictor, which Slash caresses. It doesn't take a degree in psychology to understand the message of this video. Women are barely deserving of attention in "Patience," and this theme extends into the band's more recent video, "Since I Don't Have You."

Lewis (1990) does a succinct job of summing up the G N' R approach to female images, writing that:

> Reproducing coded images of the female body and conventionally positioning girls and women as objects of male voyeurism remain effective visual strategies for associating male adolescent desire with male dominance. Representations of females in music video become inflected in ways that facilitate their integration into the specific vision of male adolescent discourse. Girls, when they appear, are not

> represented as equal participants in the symbolic system, 'the street,' but function instead to delineate male adolescent fantasy (p. 6).

Occasionally, videos show images of women that are male adolescent fantasy gone awry. ZZ Top's video, "Pincushion," is a highly narrative morality play that depends upon sexist stereotypes for its impact. In this video, a passive young bride is left at the altar because her fiancee has gotten carried away at his bachelor party and slept with the stripper. Distraught, the bride cries pitifully at home before becoming inspired to deface her fiancee's photographic image with scissors, knives, and needles. As she vandalizes the photos in a gleeful rage, the boyfriend writhes in pain, voodoo style, in the stripper's bed. As the bride gets more and more enthusiastic about her vandalism, she kisses the tattered photos, and simultaneously kiss marks appear all over the fiancee's body. When he topples over in pain and defeat, the stripper robs him and pops a balloon with her spiked heel on the way out the door.

"Pincushion" is obviously about revenge; it gives a highly stereotypical image of the woman scorned. The young bride turns from one cliché, of the blushing innocent, into another of the betrayed woman. The other woman in the video, the stripper, is never anything more than an opportunistic sex symbol with larceny in her heart. The fiancee is a stereotypical faithless bastard, painted as being worthy of little more than contempt. Yet, by the end of "Pincushion," he somehow emerges as the victim, with the women as his tormentors. Indeed, the song's lyrics are even sung from the male perspective: "I'm a pincushion; gotta face the facts. Just a pincushion; do everything she asks."

The question is, who really is the metaphorical "pincushion" in this melodrama? It would seem that the original wronged party is the bride, who was stood up and humiliated. Some interpretations of this video might say that the bride's transformation from a passive victim to a vengeful force is a positive one, yet both images are common stereotypes of women. In this video, women have two choices: be a victim or a vagina dentata and destroy the man. The man, however, may be lying on the floor, but his behavior is somehow excused because he has become a victim, to be pitied despite what he did. For women, then, it is no better to be a sadistic, amoral tormentor than a victim, because the man wins regardless.

Videos rated 5-10--Medium Levels of Sexism

While pure voyeurism, objectification and contempt may briefly summarize the general attitudes toward women in the highly rated videos, the messages become far more complicated in the medium-rated videos. There were 19 medium-sexist videos in the sample.

Part of the reason for this complexity is that many of the medium-rated videos are very much in conflict in terms of their sexist imagery. Women in these videos are not necessarily presented as stereotypical bimbos in lingerie or as pure objects who exist only to be viewed, but they still conform to the stereotypic image of the woman keeping her place. Perhaps it is this category of videos which comes the closest to representing reality, in which women demand, and receive, more respect, but still tend toward the same pitfalls of dependence upon men and sex for their identities.

The queen of this type of video is Madonna, who was not recorded in the sample but who is worth mentioning. Madonna has made a virtual career out of playing with gender roles and appropriating so-called male behavior and signs into her video and musical work. Freccero (1992) says on this point:

> You can have it all, Madonna suggests, and be credited with a mind, as well. For her girl fans, Madonna has suggested ways of appropriating rebellious masculine youth culture, both preserving and subverting femininity, mitigating the adolescent disempowerment of the female position. (p. 164)

Madonna uses traditionally disempowering signs of femininity, like skimpy clothing and S&M, to her advantage. In her videos, she turns the traditional power structure on its head, showing a woman who can be a so-called "boy toy" and still have all the power in a relationship. Madonna received extensive airplay on MTV in the 1980s by showing enough T&A to satisfy the male adolescent fantasy, but she obtained fanatical loyalty among female fans by twisting these signs and symbols into her own version of femininity, which answered to no one.

For instance, in "Borderline," Madonna is supposed to be a "wanna-be" model from the wrong side of the tracks. Her behavior, however, is less feminine than it is rooted in what Lewis terms "street culture" (p.9). In "Material Girl," Madonna uses the props of femininity like furs and jewels, to turn the victimized image of Marilyn Monroe into a power symbol who controls the entire video and all the men in it.

Sadly, however, women have lost ground on MTV. Madonna even said in a recent MTV interview that she might not produce any more videos, because MTV wouldn't give them airtime. In Madonna's case, this lack of exposure might be because she went overboard depicting graphic sexuality in

her videos. However, 1980s female rock icons like Cyndi Lauper, Pat Benatar, and Chrissie Hynde have also fallen by the wayside. There seem to be precious few replacements in music video.

Sometimes, a male band surprisingly produces a female address video, which looks at the world through a female perspective and appropriates traditionally male signs and symbols. Although Aerosmith's two videos, "Crying" and "Amazing," have conflicting and contradictory messages, they are still some of the few videos which include women in an active way.

"Crying" actually comes close to being a video about female empowerment, although there are still some conflicts to discuss. "Crying" is an extremely narrative video; it really resembles a short film more than a rock video.

"Crying," like "Pincushion," is ultimately a story about revenge, but it is accomplished without the violence or the two-dimensionality of the latter. It opens in the middle of a love affair which has hints of sexual obsession. The man and woman are shown in bed, and they each have half-heart tattoos which fit together to form one heart. In the next scene, she is at a movie with a friend and sees him there with another girl. She gets upset and storms out of the theater. Next, the couple are in her car, and when she parks and tries to get close, he rejects her. Furious, she throws him out of the car, and he sits on the dusty ground, laughing, while she drives off. She then gets her tattoo altered into a whole heart, with a naked woman riding atop it. After she changes her tattoo, she abandons her car by the side of the road, changes her little girl flowered dress for shorts and a tank top, and walks down the road. She then gets her navel pierced, and looks down and smiles at it. The scene

then changes to a diner, where she's exchanging looks with a cute guy, who then betrays her by grabbing her backpack and running away. She chases him, catches him, and kicks him to the ground before taking her bag back. In the final scene of this complex video, she is standing on the edge of a freeway overpass, attempting suicide. The cops are there, and her ex-boyfriend is begging her to get down. She jumps. Suddenly, there's a bungee cord attached to her. As she bounces back up, she flips her ex the finger.

While "Crying" may be about revenge against an unfaithful lover, it is also the story of a personal odyssey and transformation. The woman in this video takes control over her life and tries to change her way of approaching life and men. She takes to the road, changes her appearance, and changes the way she reacts to men. While the final fake suicide at the video's conclusion is cathartic, it is also unnecessary because she has already freed herself of her ex-boyfriend's hold.

In terms of Lewis' (1990) symbolic structure of "the street," this video uses signs and symbols usually associated with men to the woman's advantage. Tattooing, usually a male rite of passage, is used as a symbol of female transformation, what Lewis terms an "access sign," which "visually appropriate the privileged experience of boys and men" (p. 6). Her navel pierce, certainly not considered a feminine practice, is another step in her metamorphosis. She also sheds the cute girlie dresses and favors street style clothing like flannel shirts, jeans, and Doc Martens. Finally, the woman is violated and fights back hard in true streetfighting style. Even the bungee jumping at the end is a sport associated with male bravado.

"Crying," however, is one of the few videos to possess a primarily female address. Aerosmith's other video, "Amazing," isn't nearly as interested in telling a woman's story, but it does employ an element virtually absent in music video, a continuing female character.

"Amazing" is basically a male address video, taken from a male perspective, with a twist at the end. Its structure, while narrative, is even more complex than "Crying." This video's theme is virtual reality via a home computer system and includes lots of interesting special effects and jump cuts between the real reality and the computer generated one. In the video, a young man prepares to play on his computer. After fighting over access codes, he is allowed in to play, and creates a woman of his liking, who just happens to be the same woman from "Crying." After giving himself short hair and a fast motorcycle, he offers a helmet to the woman, who rolls her eyes at him in disgust. With one quick computer adjustment, he changes her outfit and her attitude, and his fantasy continues. They ride, kiss, and eventually run out of gas in the desert. He tries to hitchhike and fails. When she puts out her thumb, however, pulling up her skirt in a provocative fashion, an out-fashioned bi-plane pulls up. They get in, fly up, and then suddenly are in different outfits and go "sky surfing," gliding on snowboards and parachuting down to earth. Before he can reach the ground, though, his drink spills on the keyboard in a gush of liquid, and the computer program ceases. Satisfied with his adventure, the young man prints out a computer generated picture of the woman and hangs it up on a clothesline with other pictures of models and actresses. Then, the camera pulls back, revealing that he's actually on a computer screen, being viewed by the woman. She sits at

the computer, removing her virtual reality helmet. She smiles, and the video ends.

It is tempting to dismiss this video as little more than pure adolescent male fantasy. After all, the male protagonist creates his own woman, and even changes her when she doesn't behave to his liking. The activities within the video of motorcycle riding, flying, and sky surfing are all textual practice of male pastimes. The pictures on the clothesline are sexual notches on his belt. Moreover, the entire video appears to be told as male address, through his whims and desires--the gush of liquid which ends his fantasy is a barely subtle visual metaphor for ejaculation.

Yet, there is more to "Amazing" than meets the eye, and this text may have a variety of readings. While this video does lack a female address, the woman within the video is still a character who seems to have an awful lot of power for a computer creation. She scorns him at first, and even after she's modified, there's still an element of surprise in her behavior--she is acting independently of his desires. She, in fact, instigates much of the action which takes place in the video, moving them onto the motorcycle, into sexual activity, and onto the plane. While this assertiveness might be just another element in the young man's fantasy, of a woman who takes control, there's a twist to her character. Her appearance at the very end of the video, outside of the virtual reality program, is perhaps a way of letting the audience know that she was a living, breathing, participant in the scenario, and not just some cyber creation. Indeed, the entire virtual reality fantasy might be hers, not his.

Of course, both "Crying" and "Amazing" are guilty of some of the same objectification noted in the previously mentioned highly rated sexist videos.

Both videos focus unduly on the woman's body, on her young face and full lips. Indeed, the actress who plays the young woman, Alicia Silverstone, looks barely old enough to be called a woman at all. She's just out of girlhood, truly an adolescent male's dream, except that there's a sneering, hard edge to her. She has none of the vacancy of the women from "Patience," nor the complacency of the women in "Gin and Juice." Furthermore, the young woman Silverstone is portraying is a real character, not a prop, and the more she is shown on screen in an unself-conscious manner, the harder it is to objectify her.

It is ironic that, while an all-male, hard rock band like Aerosmith has come close to producing some interesting female address videos, an all-female band like Salt N' Pepa has created a confusing, conflicted video regarding women and sexuality.

Salt N' Pepa's video, "Whatta Man" is a cooperative effort with help from En Vogue, another all-female, all African-American group. The video is basically a postmodern type, using flashing images of men and band members before returning to the central image of the video: all the band members frolicking in incredibly skimpy clothing. Additionally, one image, of a man dressed in padded, lacy lingerie posturing on a bed, brings up a variety of confusing questions. Is this video celebrating cross-dressing or lesbianism? Is this video, which seemingly celebrates female sexuality, really directed at women at all? The image of one of the band members, lounging in a bubble bath and staring coquettishly into the camera seems far more a male address image than one for females. It is hard to imagine many straight

women responding to that "come hither" attitude, and it is doubtful that this video is directed toward lesbians.

"Whatta Man" brings up a variety of feminist issues. The mere existence of skimpy, revealing clothing in a video does not necessarily render it sexist. Salt N' Pepa, En Vogue, and every other musician should and does have the right to wear whatever she likes and enjoy the process. Rabinowitz ((1990) puts this into more academic terms, saying, "The radical potential of gender for feminist theory is not that it reduces all women to identical subjects but that it explodes subjectivity across a series of fields, each differentiated from the other, each multiplicitiously developing in dialogue across radically heterogeneous spaces" (p. 154).

Part of the problem with a video like "Whatta Man" is that these women are not really differentiated from one another. They are all dressed in the same fashion, and all behave the same way, dancing seductively and aggressively around the men. This behavior seems more in line with a male fantasy than a female one. Indeed, the cookie cutter images of the women, who are still shot in Mulvey's (1975) classic triangulation, forces the audience to become masculine voyeurs. Even the man dressed in the women's lingerie seems less a statement about men getting in touch with their feminine selves than a way to present men in such an androgynous fashion that they are not longer threatening to male viewers.

"Whatta Man" sorely lacks consciousness. It is unclear that the band members made a conscious decision to play with the video medium and with sexual morays. Madonna is extremely adept at playing with and appropriating masculine youth culture, while both celebrating and subverting

femininity. She uses traditionally disempowering images, such as sadomasochism in "Express Yourself," for her own purposes. Salt N' Pepa and En Vogue, however, seem unsure about what they are trying to celebrate. Their sexual power in "Whatta Man" can only occur if the men are as passive as the typical video woman. The women act so much like men that the viewer responds to them as if they were men rather than women, thus eradicating the video's message.

0-5 rated Videos--Low Levels of Sexism

Although some of the medium-rated videos have some positive presentations of women, they are still very dependent upon the female form as a visual, rather than a character, focus. The woman in a video like "Crying" is the main character, but she is also looked at using that same Mulvey's (1975) system of looks. This system almost forces every viewer to look at female bodies from a male standpoint.

The low-rated videos, however, are different. The 17 videos in this sample attempt to break the system of looks and force the viewer to see the female performers for themselves, as people, rather than as female bodies. Sometimes, though, this means almost "desexualizing" the performers, making them into androgynous characters, or rewriting old narratives to make them fit a new vision.

Perhaps the most complex and confusing low-rated video is Tori Amos' "God." A post-modern video, "God," regarding religion, appears to pick up where Madonna left off in her "Like a Prayer" video. "Like a Prayer" took Catholicism and religious symbolism and turned it on its head.

Freccero (1992) says this video speaks of the role of sacrifice, first empowering and then an entrapment, played by women in "the quintessential Roman Catholic fantasy of sacrifice, redemption, and salvation...the video suggests Madonna's rebellion against this entrapment by presenting the image of a successful heroine" (p. 178).

"Like a Prayer," though, was a narrative video. "God" is not, and its fractured form makes it confusing. The entire video is based around Amos, in a church, playing with dozens of rats which swarm around and on her. At the same time, there are flashing shots of an Indian man huddled in the corner of the church. These images go on until the end of the video, in which Amos is suddenly at a Pentecostal revival meeting, dancing in a rhapsodic daze with a snake held in her hands.

While Amos is definitely the focus of the camera, she presents herself to the viewer in a conscious way, using the camera for her own purposes rather than the director's. There is a quality of sensuality and playfulness in the way she dances in her t-shirt and jeans, caressing the rats which crawl over her. Just by including the rats in the video, she appears to be breaking a stereotype regarding women and long-tailed rodents. She simultaneously seems to celebrate femininity and female power, and connect these qualities to religion. It is very difficult to see Amos in an objectified way, because she is too persistent and unnerving a presence. "God" almost seems like it should be renamed "Goddess."

While "God" is a video which does not make a statement out loud, but allows the viewer to make judgments for him or herself, Queen Latifah's video, "U.N.I.T.Y," screams feminism loud and clear. Latifah's video is

nothing short of a feminist statement, aimed specifically at the stereotypic black male's treatment of black women. "Don't call me a bitch or a ho," Latifah exclaims, while confronting abusive men on the street, a traditionally male turf. "U.N.I.T.Y." fits in beautifully with Lewis' (1990) idea of female artists taking back the male sign system of the street.

"U.N.I.T.Y." actually seems to be the answer to all the male rap videos, which rely heavily upon street imagery and primarily depict males, with women as props. While these male rap videos glorify life on the corner, and hanging out in an adolescent world, Queen Latifah blasts this imagery to bits, exposing it as a venue for sexual harassment. A quality in this video that seems to be missing in many others is anger, which Latifah lets fly at every opportunity. There is no sense of women keeping in their place or remaining dumb and passive; Latifah fights back, shouting verbal abuse and getting tough with her abusers.

There is some imagery in "U.N.I.T.Y." that is ambiguous, like when Latifah hangs in a cage, 20 feet up, over her male tormentors and sings about how she doesn't have to take it anymore. This scene could be read as a metaphor for how Latifah feels caged by black male attitudes toward women, or it could be taken as just another caged woman, dangling temptingly above the men.

Queen Latifah's anger in this video really makes it a standout, as she makes no attempt to win over a male audience. Her challenging posture is, most likely, intimidating to male adolescents, but is probably a refreshing change for the female MTV audience. Most videos by female performers

depend upon coy looks and masked sexuality to get their point across, but not Latifah, who isn't afraid to show a little rage.

While Latifah gets seriously unladylike and Amos reinterprets religion, the band Blind Melon creates a rewrite of the Ugly Duckling fairy tale, transforming it into a tale which accepts rather than changes appearances. Blind Melon's video, "No Rain," is a loosely narrative video which achieved a cult following because of its main character, the Bee Girl.

In "No Rain," a little girl dressed up like a bumblebee tap dances for a crowd in a theater, but is laughed at. She cries, but then picks her head up and ventures out into the street, tap dancing for different people. She gets unfavorable reactions from every one of her audiences, ranging from laughter to a puzzled head shaking. The Bee Girl cannot find a place where she fits in until she finds a bucolic green field loaded with Bee People, of both genders, dancing together. In the last scene, the Bee Girl is rejoicing and dancing with them in a great circle.

It's hard to objectify the Bee Girl, both because she is so individual and surreal and because she is a girl, with prepubescent breasts and baby fat. Because it's inappropriate to view the Bee Girl in a sexualized manner, she becomes an individual character instead.

"No Rain" is definitely a story of acceptance along the lines of "The Ugly Duckling," except in the fairy tale, the duckling had to change to fit in with the other swans. In this video narrative's case, the Bee Girl doesn't have to change at all. This video's message is directed at everyone, not just women or men, and says that everyone has a place, regardless of gender, appearance, and oddities. This becomes abundantly clear at the video's

conclusion, when the Bee Girl is surrounded by a community of her own kind, all dressed as bees, all dancing the dance.

Conclusion

This study has looked in-depth at a small sample of videos, gathered from a sample of 24 hours of MTV programming. Obviously, a plethora of video types, genres, and images of women are represented within this sample, and this study has addressed them on an individual level. What is striking about this study is that the videos picked for analysis were the standouts in terms of messages, politics and imagery; out of 118 videos, only about a dozen were truly notable.

Another observation was the under-representation of women artists on MTV. There were only nine videos by women artists in 24 hours of MTV programming, over a 12-week period. During the sample, one Janet Jackson video was shown three times, but a more alternative artist like Tori Amos was only shown once. In fact, about half the women artists given airplay on MTV were alternative rather than mainstream, and thus received far less airplay than their mainstream counterparts. Perhaps it is tougher to become successful in the mainstream music business as a woman, forcing many of them to turn to alternative venues.

While videos by women artists were underplayed, images of women in videos by male artists did not fare much better. Women are often absent in music videos; in this study 19 videos contained no women at all. Women are also mere window dressing as in the Guns N' Roses videos mentioned in the highly sexist video category. Lewis' (1990) concept of the street as a male sign system seems to have stood the test of time, particularly among black male

rap artists like Snoop Doggy Dogg and Ice Cube. In these male dominated videos, women are given perfunctory parts to play in a primarily male world. The women have no identity of their own, and are often treated with contempt or simply ignored.

When women do appropriate male sign systems, as in the Aerosmith video "Crying," it is often in response to a man. Even women centered videos like Salt N' Pepa's "Whatta Man" are based upon women responding to men and talking about men and relationship issues. There are few images of women in MTV videos which are independent of male imagery, while there are many instances of men standing on their own in music videos. Nineteen out of the 118 videos recorded had no images of women in them at all.

Mulvey's (1975) "system of looks" seems prevalent in music videos, perhaps partially because, in a two-to-four minute video, about all one is able to do is look. There is little time to become absorbed in the complexities of character development, and as the video's main purpose is promotion of a song, meaningful dialogue is out of the question. Furthermore, this "system of looks" demands that all viewers, not just male viewers, look at videos from the standpoint of a male voyeur. Thus, all the young women in that desirable teenage demographic are forced to view images of women on MTV not from their own perspective, but from the viewpoint of how men see women.

There are, of course, other factors besides this "system of looks" which effect how one reads a text like music video. Brown and Schulze (1990) found that one's race was a factor in how an audience read a video like Madonna's

"Papa Don't Preach." Additionally, MTV is still a venue directed mainly at adolescent boys, perhaps because it is the easiest viewpoint to maintain--developing a female sensibility in mainstream film technique is a difficult task. Furthermore, MTV is first and foremost an advertising medium, and videos are shot and designed to sell records. MTV, however, ultimately decides what will receive airplay on the channel, and it could make different choices. In the sample, its playlist was very limited, and in fact seemed to mimic Top-40 lineups. For instance, Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers' "Mary Jane's Last Dance" was shown five times, Snoop Doggy Dogg's "Gin and Juice" four times, while Queen Latifah's "U.N.I.T.Y." was shown twice.

Another interesting topic to explore is that of interpretation. If director Keir McFarlane's experience is typical, it seems clear that the conceived text of "Mary Jane's Last Dance" was very different from the transmitted text broadcast on MTV. Additionally, the received and recalled texts related in this study by Internet users were again very different from McFarlane's original conception of the video's storyline. Perhaps because of creative constraints, financial concerns, a three to four minute timespan and (usually) a lack of dialogue, music videos are simply open texts. They can be interpreted in a multiplicity of ways, and what might be one person's sexism is another's love scene.

Perhaps many of these arguments seem self-explanatory. Record companies produce videos and show them on MTV to sell records and make money, it's as simple as that. However, it is striking to read studies like Lewis (1990) and Freccero (1992), who wrote about female address videos from the 1980s, and see the marked difference between what was receiving airplay then

and what is popular on MTV today. It seems peculiar that, since the Year of the Woman, the Anita Hill hearings, and the existence of a highly educated First Lady, a medium like music videos has gone backward rather than forward. On the Internet, responses to a question regarding sexist images on MTV videos garnered responses like, "Trust me, the sexism in rock video angle has been done to death," (Mark Johnson, April 1994) and "Why the hell don't people just lighten the fuck up?"(Dave B., April, 1994). Obviously, some music video fans don't think that images of women are important enough to discuss, or question, or write a thesis about.

Meanwhile, the female address video on MTV, off to a hopeful start in the 1980s, has basically gone the way of the dinosaur. It has been replaced by the glorification of the street and male culture in grunge and rap videos. Although an all-male band like Aerosmith might be commended for at least making a women the focus of two of their videos, it seems ironic that they are doing it, rather than female artists.

Directions For Further Research

Although this study is a critical analysis and thus is not a quantitative effort, it does give an indication of what type of videos are being presently played on MTV. The next step would be an audience-centered study of adolescent girls, which would consist first of gleaning their definitions of sexism, and having them rate or read a selection of rock videos for themselves. If there is any glimmer of "cause and effect" relationship between the images of women in music videos and viewer attitudes toward women, an audience-centered study would help pinpoint it.

However, it seems to this researcher that more research is needed on the newer musical genres, such as grunge. Grunge, and particularly grunge culture, seems to have precious little to do with sexuality and gender roles in general. Ferguson (Utne Reader, 1994) observed that grunge is more about sadness than anything else.

> In fact, Nirvana made abuse his (Kurt Cobain's) generation's defining metaphor. The hit "Smells Like Teen Spirit" was an anthem of powerless rage and betrayal. It was a resounding fuck you to the boomers and all the false expectations they saddled us with about rock'n'roll revolution. And it made psychological damage--with all its concurrent themes of child abuse, drug addiction, suicide, and neglect--a basis for social identity...Nirvana's "Teen Spirit," and indeed all of grunge culture, is rooted in the feeling of damage. (p. 60)

Ferguson (1994) also observes that "the empowered feeling you get from listening to these songs lies in unearthing that essential nugget of shame. It's like going to a 12-step meeting" (p.60). If grunge, one of the music industry's newest and most popular genres, is indeed rooted in sadness and

shame, then it should be an equal opportunity genre of sorts. After all, males hold no premium on sadness and betrayal.

It only takes a quick glance at MTV's grunge lineup to see that it is primarily male bands who get airtime. Bands like Pearl Jam, Soundgarden, Alice in Chains, and the now-defunct Nirvana are played often. Female-fronted grunge bands, such as L-7 or Hole, get little or no airtime. Even in the grunge videos by male bands, there are few images of women presented.

According to Ferguson (1994) grunge provides an example of something much more chilling than whether or not women are excluded from rock venues.

> The loop taken by a new musical style from the underground to the mainstream is now so compressed that there's no moment of freedom and chaos when a counterculture can take root. Even anti-corporatism can be rerouted into a marketing ploy. MTV makes fun of itself in order to ingratiate itself with its audience, but it's still one big extended commercial. (p. 62)

Obviously, there are many directions which future studies on MTV might take. One such study might be actually following a band through the video production process and chronicling the decisions regarding creativity and image. Another study would be to interview different bands from different genres, and ask them where the women are, and why aren't there more of them. Is it a marketing decision made by recording companies?

There is no doubt that MTV will continue to evolve, and continue to sell music, products, and image to the world's teenagers. It will be interesting to see if music videos remain a part of MTV's programming, or if they fall by the wayside as MTV branches out into its own programming. Shows such as "Beavis and Butthead" and "The Brothers Grunt" utilize videos as a mere

part of their formats, using them as visual background noise rather than the main attraction. If this trend continues, then the full-blown, narrative music video may go the way of the dinosaur, and be replaced by a form of mixed media beyond imagining.

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Appendix A

Tally Sheet for Music Video Coding

Name of artist: _____

Song title: _____

Recording studio: _____

Video director: _____

Sexism:

Level of Sexism	Images of Women	Images of Men
Level 1: condescending		
Level 2: Keep Her Place/ Act Like a Man		
Level 3: Contradictory		
Level 4: Fully Equal		

No images of women present in video: _____

Comments:

Appendix B

The raw numbers in this study are divided into high, medium and low categories. These totals correspond with the analysis found in the critical section of this thesis. Because the total number of usable videos was considerably less than in previous studies of music videos, it is difficult to compare them.

Vincent, Davis and Boruszkowski (1987) found 60 out of a total 110 videos were Level I videos, or at a high level of sexism. Levels II and III videos garnered a respective 19 and 14, while Level IV videos totaled 17. In this study, the levels of sexism appeared to be more equal across the board, with a high score of 18, medium score of 19, and low score of 17. Unfortunately, due to repeated videos and videos which excluded images of women, 64 of the total 118 videos could not be included in the coding at all.

High	Medium	Low	No Women	Repeats
18	19	17	19	45

Total # of videos: 118

The original scores based on the four-level scale are as follows.

Level of Sexism	Images of Women	Images of Men
Level 1	26	2
Level 2	6	15
Level 3	7	6
Level 4	15	31

Absence of women: 19	Repeats: 45	Total # of videos: 118

Violence, coded in previous studies, was found to be virtually non-existent in this study. Out of 118 videos, only 10 contained any physical violence, and in 5 out of the 10 instances this was directed toward men, not women. This finding is similar to Vincent, Davis and Boruzskowski (1987), who found only a small percentage of outright violent imagery and acts in their study. Specific sexual acts were not coded in this study because, as explained earlier, consensual sexual activity between two people is not a sexist activity, just a sexual one.